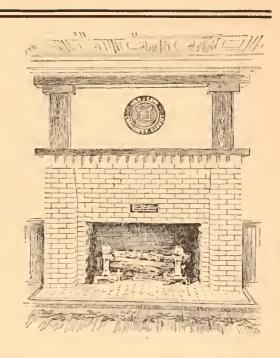




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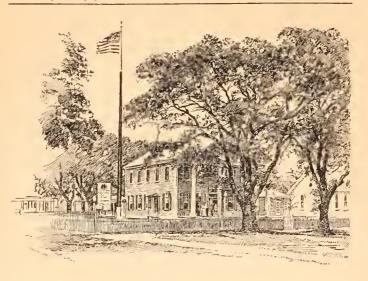


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The Mason's Club House Southport

## THE TOWN THAT FOUND ITSELF

## By JOHN R. COLTER

NCE upon a time a little over two years ago there was a town in our South which was socially poverty-stricken. It was a century and a half old, and sixty per cent of its white citizens were members of five or six families who had lived there for generations; yet there were persons who did not know their own cousins living a few rods

off. There were various social circles, clannish circles, whose members never met. Religious denominations did not mingle. There was no neighborliness to the town, no spirit of gettogether. The people themselves said so.

I T was the more surprising because the town was isolated by Nature and has remained so for lack of good roads. You might think that a community which is visited by a single train and single little river boat a day would have learned to become socially self-nourishing. But it had not. Never at any time did the people of this town all get together to talk, to sing, walk, play, dance, listen to entertainment or laugh together. In consequence the town did not know itself. Incidentally their children did not know how to play games and get fun out of them—which boded ill for the next generation. And thus things had been in this North Carolina town for a long while.

BUT somebody shot somebody in Europe and a while later we went to war. The fort which stood on an island close to this seaport town began to bristle new guns and extra complements of men. Before long the Government was shipping young artillerymen down to the fort from all over the country—till they outnumbered the citizens of the adjacent town. Then suddenly the town realized that it was a war camp community.

"Thirty miles away, by boat, there is a larger city," the people told themselves, "but we are here close at hand. We

must be host to these boys of every state."

And you know the result, for it is a truly patriotic town. In spite of its lack of organization socially, in spite of heavy Liberty Loan and welfare quotas under which it staggered (for it is by no means a well-to-do town)—in spite of the faet that there isn't a man in town worth fifty thousand dollars, the town established a fine Army and Navy Club and gave deep from purse and heart to maintain a royal welcome for every man of the service who put foot on their soil. Perhaps you can guess the further result: that through serving others the town found itself. The girls and women made cakes together; daneed and entertained side by side. The mothers of this town joined hands to make a service flag-and dedicated it in rousing public meeting. The fathers mingled in hard-working eommittees to do this and that for the soldiers. Till the entertaining of soldiers became the community passion and the club-house the social center of the town.

The town is Southport, North Carolina. I cannot call it a city even though it is that legally. It lies thirty miles south of Wilmington, on a beautiful, elevated point of land above where the Cape Fear River flows into the sea. There are

lovely grassy lanes (called streets) running between mighty live-oaks and merging in a magnificent common or broad public lawn which is itself hemmed by the giants which show green the year around. At dusk, when Southport might be at supper and the common and its great sentinels alone in their beauty, you would not be at all surprised to see a Druid of old step forth from the heart of one of the great trees and lift bearded face to worship. Folks sit on the porches of their old colonial homes and listen to sounds no more disturbing than the low of the cattle grazing in a nearby yard and the gentle moan of the whistling-buoy out in the river channel. "God did a lot for the town" they say—and they are right.

But the trouble was that the people of Southport did little to keep the town and the town life as beautiful as was intended. It is a fault true of a good many thousand towns of its size in the South, North—yes, and even in the West—and, anyway, Southport has overcome the fault, so there can be no harm in speaking publicly of it. There was nothing to draw them together, before the war, though they lived in a half-mile diameter! There was, literally, no community spirit. They did not put to use the perfect plaza of green lawn and shade trees. They did not even bother to keep it very clean. They tore up their letters at the post-office and crumpled their cracker bags at the grocery and let the sea-breeze speekle the common with waste. They said "Good enough!" to the old schoolhouse, though its bottom showed an ugly gap where it had been propped from the earth-and it never occurred to them to beautify the town by putting a hedge around this scar. Nor yellow jessamine 'round the telegraph poles, which would have been a fine touch. Nor a fine straight Carolina pine, trimmed to a flagstaff, floating the flag over the common. Nor Chautauquas. These things and public dances and amateur theatricals and community sings and pageants and adequate library facilities and story hours of the town's marvellous legends of Revolutionary days—they did not come to pass in Southport, though the need was great for them.

Little wonder, then, that Susan Blank, nineteen, lovely, intelligent, brought up wholly within this isolated town, when asked who the *other* girl of exactly the same name as hers was, replied:

"She must be a cousin of mine, I reckon. I never did hear of her before—but there's slews of folks in this town I don't

know!"

Little wonder that there are many persons, not enemies but casual friends, who lived their lives together in this town without seeing and chatting with each other in years. (Remember that there are a thousand white people in the town and the business section runs, perhaps, two blocks.) Little wonder cither that the newspaper once published there failed and died, and that births, funerals, weddings and the like are made known by a single written announcement which a negro servant carries from house to house—to be read and handed back. Very little wonder that there was a social poverty.

It took the war to wake up Southport. The Masons of the town started things by giving over the greater part of their splendid clubhouse which overlooks the beautiful common in the center of the town. They raised money, got others to raise money, got a gift of a bowling alley, scraped, managed, fought for the success of the venture—till at length Southport grew enthusiastic. The people began to think socially and act in unison for a common purpose which was their very own.

And the result was, in detail, that hundreds of soldiers and sailors were taken into homes and clubhouse, that the life of the town was stimulated, that Southport made big strides and grew ambitious.

As the number of soldiers increased Southport wanted to increase facilities and better organize the work, and accordingly applied to the agency which the Government had appointed to care for such matters—the War Camp Community Service, operating nationally. More money was thus supplied, and a man trained in community social life was sent there to serve the town and soldiers. A fine canteen was built, a real library opened, billiard tables, phonographs, bandstand, huge fireplace and other things were installed, and the life of the town grew richer through efforts to give others a fine time. It was not a mild, but a tremendous success. All through the war the Army and Navy Club was the center of the town's life. one came. It seemed as if folks were just now beginning to be able to satisfy a great social hunger which had been gnawing at the vitals of their social being. And so they came, in rompers, on canes, and all ages in between. And the soldiers certainly enjoyed it.

What a delightful memory to have, that they made so many men in the service happy, you say. What a shame that such a thing should have to stop with the signing of the armistice! Did the Masons take back their building? Sell the big phonograph, the bowling alley, and strip the canteen, perhaps?

No. The story of Southport is just beginning. The Army and Navy Club is not and never will be just a memory in Southport. It has entered too deeply into the life of every man, woman and child in the town to be allowed to stop

functioning. I would wager that Southport would sooner give up electricity and go back to oil lamps than let dwindle its wonderful community house and community service system which has brought riches to its social coffers. However much it meant before the armistice was signed, it has meant more since.

I saw this town which has found itself, six months after November 11. There were a few soldiers around, to be sure, for there is a small permanent garrison at the fort, but for the most part it was the people of the town who were using the community house. As I entered the colonial-pillared portico of the house seven boys were borrowing tennis nets and baseball gloves from the director's office. Somehow or other tennis eourts had sprung up in the town recently. Inside the hallway, huddled around a gleaming new drinking fountain, were other boys. It seemed to be fun to drink out of it for they had run over from sehool to do it. Out in the main hall young girls were playing the big phonograph whatever they wanted, one-step or grand opera. Inside of the Memorial Hall or auditorium recently completed a chorus of ehildren's voices was coming through the rye, coming very sweetly too as they rehearsed "for the first time on a real stage, sir!" And upstairs in the public library room older boys and girls were reading—and there was every good magazine in the eountry on the tables. I thought that the whole of young Southport must have walked bodily to the community house straight from school-and I learned that I was pretty near right. We sat around and watched for several hours and it was a continual drift of young people, playing, singing, borrowing basketballs (a novelty) and boxing gloves and

rackets and bats—all of which were promptly dispensed free by the director.

The point, of course, is that these boys never boxed two years ago! Nor played tennis, nor even the more common games which your city boy was brought up on. It is true, and it is true of hundreds of small towns. The point is that as sportsmanship will come from community athletic equipment, so the appreciation of music will come from the big phonograph which *anybody* can run in and set going at any time. You should see them around it! The point about this community house is that it is giving a public piano, public bowling, billiards, auditorium, banquet hall, library and a dozen other things to people who have never enjoyed such things before—people, who because they lacked them, drifted apart from knowing one another.

It is a fact that as the social life of the town flourished, its people thought bigger thoughts and grew broader. Whereas people had traveled in cliques before, they began to mingle at the community house affairs without regard to denomination, ancient family, lodge affiliation or other distinction. The splendid kitchen and private dining-room of the community house tempt the women of one church to give a bublic bazaar-and lo! against all prediction of failure, it is a success. The women of the town came out, bought, chatted, and learned more about each other. The parents hear the children talk of the "sings" on the clubhouse lawn, think they will go to look on, and when they come are the most thrilled of all at a patriotic outburst of song. They have not been so wrought up emotionally in years; it is a big new thing in their life. And on holidays, I am told, everyone looks to a big town social and appropriate celebration at the "Club."

What an opportunity to develop a town like this, one hungry for social culture!

The town life is richer by a hundred ways. There is always something interesting going on in Southport's little "melting-pot"—a dance for the young people, or a spelling-bee in which the kids spell down their elders, perhaps, or a debate or lecture or, now that they have the auditorium with stage, an entertainment. They have already staged a woman's minstrel show and have arranged for lectures to women on social subjects. Or perhaps there is nothing special on—just to play the phonograph and chat with those who sit on the great stretches of piazzas is a treat, for the climate is fine and the air delightfully fresh. Always there are bright lights, things to eat and drink at low cost, magazines of the latest date, and others to talk to. In short, Southport has found itself socially and is never going to lose itself again.

It is not hard to foretell what the future of this town is going to be. You know that the Masons will never ask for the clubhouse back again, and instead of lessening the facilities the people will be adding to them. You feel sure that the little town library room, which has been able to afford to keep open only four hours a week, will be combined with the community house library and thus serve all the time with united strength. Co-operation will develop in church socials, bazaars and entertainments. Denominational prejudices, softened, will cease to play an active part in the town's life. The labyrinthian relationship of the people of the few families will be no social liability but an asset. The phonograph records will not be allowed to grow ancient, nor the bandstand to lose its spick-and-span white gleam. Sings and concerts will be more frequent than ever; home talent will be developed.

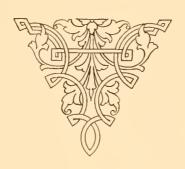
Southport will realize its ambitions, no doubt of that. That plaza of lawn with the live-oak sentinels will not be neglected; the paper tearing will stop—if it hasn't—and holidays will be suitably celebrated by pageants over the fine expanse of the common. It must be that way for the place was thus designed by Naturc. The yellow jessamine will spring up at the base of the telegraph poles; the sehool will get its hedge; the newspaper will have to revive; and the flagpole, I forgot to say, is already there.

And, perhaps best of all, the fireplace of the great hall in the community house will be ringed on winter nights eight deep with ehildren-and grown folks too-and there they will have a story-hour and listen to legends. Not legends of other towns, let us hope, or far away places, but to Southport tales of long ago: how "twenty pirates under the skull and erossbones did anchor in peaceful Southport harbor" far back in 1745 before they called it Southport; how in Revolutionary days their forefathers routed the British from the eountyacross the King's Highway which to this day runs near the town; how the fieree pirate "Blaekbeard" Teach was slain in bloody dirk-fight on his own slippery deek in Southport waters. Or one of Southport's own pilot-veterans will elear his voice and tell them tales of pilot-houses raked by Yankee canister as the blockade-runners slipped out by night and darted between the Northern frigates.

They will hear these things, let us hope, for Romance hangs heavy about their town—and by the hearing of them and the meeting together they will be nourishing their social life on their own lore, in their own proper way. And thus will Southport most truly do her duty by her youth and by Society.

Is that merely painting a pretty picture? Perhaps—but go yourself to Southport town and examine the canvas. You will find that the miracle is well sketched in and ready for the paint. Southport, in two short years, found itself. It is true that the war galvanized this community into action, but once started and encouraged it has not slipped back even in peace. The moral, of course, is that there are many Southports in the United States which can find themselves if they are started by impulse from without. They need only a stimulus, these American towns of fifteen hundred to two thousand population, and real neighborliness and community spirit would spring up within their gates. Having looked upon Southport, having watched it find itself and rejoice, I think it would be a thing tremendously worth-while doing.

What town has done, town ean do.





OMMUNITY SERVICE Inc., has been formed in response to insistent invitation from scores of Southports.

It is the successor to that lusty, but, fortunately, short-lived youngster, War Camp Community Service, which in turn is an outgrowth of the

Playground and Recreation Association of America.

The Playground Association was engaged (as for a decade past) in developing adequate recreational facilities in American cities when the war broke out.

Then thousands of America's finest young men, answering the call to the colors, began thronging into camps. The nearby cities suddenly found themselves confronted with a new and extremely difficult problem. It was this—what to do with these soldiers and sailors and marines when they came to town on leave. Most of the camp towns were small. They were geared to entertain, after a fashion and for a profit, a few hundreds or at most a few thousands of visitors, the thousands only upon special occasions such as conventions or similar affairs. No city, not even New York, was prepared to see that the boy who a few weeks before had been a homeloving American youth but suddenly had become a soldier, set down among strangers, had a good time during the few hours he could be spared from the very necessary and pressing business of learning his new trade.

The result was that commercialism in its ugliest form seized the opportunity to exploit your neighbors' sons and perhaps your own. The amusement to be found by the soldier or sailor on leave in the early days was not the sort you like to think about. And when his money was gone, that was the end of it. He could walk the streets until time to go back to drill.

The War Department and the Navy Department quickly saw the peril in the situation. So they called upon the Playground Association to take hold, and War Camp Community Service was the result.

As War Camp Community Service conceived the problem, it could not be solved by any outside agency, no matter how great or how well organized. It had to be met by the communities themselves. W. C. C. S. could only give the benefit of its advice and experience, could only point the way. The work had to be done through the proper co-ordination of the latent recreational facilities of each camp town and the development by the citizens themselves of new facilities where, as in nearly every case, the existing facilities were inadequate.

It was, as W.C.C.S visioned it, a problem of neighborliness. What Bill and Fred wanted, was a touch of home. They wanted to meet home folks, or, since that usually was impossible, to meet the same sort of folks. They wanted home cooking, and a bed which was more like home than an army bunk. They wanted to see the town so they could write home about it. They wanted to meet nice girls, like the girls they knew at home, and wanted buttons sewed on, and a swim and a game of billiards and a place to rest and talk.

That's what they got, insofar as the earnest effort of thousands and thousands of hospitable people in the camp towns all over the United States could see that they got such home welcomes. There was no coddling, no charity, no philanthropy in the formal sense, no institutional feeling. The idea was that these folks were entertaining the neighbors' boys. Doing it in that spirit, they did it well.

But never mind, for a moment, what they did for the boys in uniform. More important, or at least equally important,

was what they did for themselves. Read the story of Southport. That tells it. Folks got acquainted as they never had before. They became ncighbors.

The war is over; now what? Shall we lose its benefits?

Had the community spirit been developed to the extent it might have been developed a decade or two before the war woke us up, how many ugly things that are rearing their heads now would never have been born! These things cannot exist where every man is a neighbor and friend to every other man in his community. When men and women and children all play together they understand one another. Suspicion disappears, friendship is born and justice reigns,

Utopian? It is not Utopian.

It is the most practical thing in a practical world.

Community Service, then, is going to make over America in a year?

Nobody said anything so absurd. But the idea behind Community Service would make over America and the world if it could be applied to the ultimate of its possibilities. Perhaps you are pessimistic enough to think that such a day never will arrive. But you have no objection, have you, to something tangible, say a playground in your neighborhood, or a Community House where people can go for neighborhood parties and dances and meetings of all kinds? That is the beginning of the Community Scrvice idea.

It is non-sectarian, non-partisan, non-rigid. Its aim is to make itself superfluous as soon as possible. It has nothing to sell; nothing to give away except the benefit of its extensive experience in teaching communities to find themselves, as Southport has done.

A means has been found for giving peace-time permanence

to the benefits of united community effort in Community Service (Incorporated). It inherits all of War Camp Community Service's invaluable experience and it inherits, too, the benefits of the long experience of the Playground Association. It operates nationally, as any such movement must operate if every community is to have the benefit of what is learned by practical and successful work in others.

It will not intrude upon you, but it will help you and your community if it is invited. Call upon it.

Lct us not lose the fine spirit of enthusiasm and of common purpose which we learned when we united for the great and holy purpose of winning the war. Let's pull together always for a better America and a friendlier home town.

The idea once was put better for us than we ever can hope to put it—

"Love thy neighbor as thyself."







